

24 March 2020

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Dear Tim,

### **Ultimo Power House – SHR Nomination**

#### ***The Exhibited Nomination Form***

I refer to the exhibited Nomination Form for the former Ultimo Power House that is proposed to be presented to the Heritage Council for consideration for inclusion on the NSW State Heritage Register. Although the nomination carries the National Trust's name, in its current form it is very different to the nomination submitted by the National Trust in 2015. It appears to have been considerably re-worded since its receipt by Heritage NSW. The Ultimo Power House is clearly of State-level significance and should be included in the State Heritage Register (SHR), to give it the appropriate level of statutory oversight and protection. However, the National Trust is gravely concerned that, if the Power House were to be listed on the State Heritage Register for the reasons set out in the advertised nomination, then it would be listed for inadequate and poorly stated reasons (even if this were preferable to it not being listed at all).

When the National Trust nominated the Ultimo Power House in 2015, we believed that the site involved larger heritage significance issues associated with its operation as part of the Powerhouse Museum. At the time, we had insufficient information to pursue that aspect of its significance. Our nomination also foreshadowed that we intended to nominate the Ultimo Tramshed for the SHR (this nomination has now been prepared, supported by the additional research undertaken in the interim). The Trust had expected that the consultants would engage with the additional levels of historic, aesthetic and social significance arising from the operation of the Powerhouse Museum and would amend the nomination accordingly. It was with surprise and disappointment to find that this did not occur.

The Trust has been provided with a copy of the report prepared by Cracknell & Lonergan Architects, which appears to have driven the revision of the Trust's nomination. We have reviewed this report and reject its conclusions. The report contains conclusions and recommendations that are simply untenable. Its central tenet appears to be that the alterations to the building/s to adapt them to a new use have diminished their significance as relics of the electrical industry and that the occupation of the buildings by the Museum has produced no additional value, as all of the heritage significance of the museum activity travels with the Museum. Not only is this view in direct conflict with the principles of the Burra Charter of Australia ICOMOS (specifically: Article 5.1 and Article 15.4) (see Addendum) but it appears to indicate an unawareness of the process of adaptive reuse that occurred at the time, to change the building to house specific exhibits in the MAAS collection (the Bolton & Watt Steam engine is a case in point). Using this approach, the NSW Parliament House building is an early example of a Hospital building which could be argued to have been spoilt by its adaptation for the Colonial, then State 'Seat of Government', and that the subsequent use of the building for this non-original purpose is of no particular importance. Such conclusions make no objective sense.



The National Trust is a community organisation created and supported by private citizens, with a history spanning seventy five years. Our membership and our voluntary committees include architects, engineers, builders, lawyers, archaeologists, planners and business people, some active in their professions and others retired. Many are leaders in their professions and became involved with the Trust post-retirement in order to contribute their expert and mature opinions. The views expressed by the Trust are collective views, distilled from these disparate but engaged individuals both through our Committee system and by direct and indirect contacts and discussions. It is noteworthy that the view of the National Trust, backed by this considerable committee and archival resource, is at direct odds with that being put by Cracknell & Lonergan Architects. We note also that Heritage NSW has rejected the central conclusion of the Cracknell & Lonergan report, that the Power House is only of local significance.

The Trust has difficulty in understanding how its nomination could have been so altered, without discussion or reference back to the Trust. With the nomination of the Mudgee Regent Theatre for State Heritage Register listing there was constant liaison between Heritage NSW and the Trust as the listing proposal was developed, modified and improved, including advice on independent consultant involvement. In the advertising of the nomination for public comment there was no acknowledgement that the nomination was substantially different to that submitted by the Trust. This led to various concerned individuals and organisations contacting the Trust expressing their concerns at the wording of the nomination which they understandably believed was authored by the Trust.

Notwithstanding these major concerns, the National Trust supports in principle the inclusion of the Ultimo Power House on the State Heritage Register, provided that the significance statement is complete. The Trust also believes that the former Tramshed (the Harwood Building) is of State Heritage Significance, for its history and importance as part of the tramway network, irrespective of any additional significance it has gained for its role as part of the Powerhouse Museum. A study of the heritage values of the Tramway network in Sydney (undertaken by consultants Godden Mackay Pty Ltd for the National Trust in 1994) determined that it has at least the same level of significance (if not considerably more) as the derelict Newtown Tramshed, which is the only Tramshed currently listed on the State Heritage Register.

### ***The State Heritage Significance of the Power House Museum***

The collection of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences and its display venue, the Powerhouse Museum, are of significant heritage value. Individual items in the collection are of World significance (for example the Bolton and Watt Engine; the De Meritens Generator); of National significance (the 1951 FX Holden; the 1923 Australian Tourer); and of State significance (the No.1 Railway Locomotive; the Governor General's Railway Carriage). In the Trust's view these items are the 'responsibility' of the Museum Directors to conserve and present, as the property of the people of NSW, if not Australians as a whole. The Museum, and successive State Governments, are the caretakers of these items, with a serious responsibility to ensure their preservation and accessibility for future generations.

In this context, the decision by the NSW Government in the 1980s to provide a world-class context for their conservation and display by adapting the redundant Ultimo Power Station (which had been preserved by inaction) is an important moment historically in NSW, requiring a massive investment in public funding and other government resources. The adaptation of the building was a long and carefully thought-through process, with some of the finest architects and designers in the country engaged in the exercise. The adapted building utilised the significant overhead cranes to install many of the very large items; the buildings were specifically reshaped around the requirements of both individual and groups of items and the whole site was arranged as a set of integrated elements. As an example of an adaptive reuse, it represents heritage conservation at its finest (and rarest). That this quality does not 'slap the audience in the face' is part of its value. That some in the community appear not to see this quality, either through a lack of knowledge or a lack of time to appreciate it, is not unexpected but shouldn't be taken as evidence of some fault.

The excellence of the adaptation of the Ultimo Power House as the home of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences has been the subject of architecture awards (the Sir John Sulman Medal, 1988) and international



recognition and praise. If there is a criticism of the place, it is that it remains too small to house and display the extent of the collection, leading to the recent opening of its 'storage' facility at Castle Hill to the public.

Consequently, in the light of more information and of the opinions of respected experts who have expressed their views to the Trust, we have resolved to prepare a nomination for State Heritage Register listing for the Powerhouse Museum as an integrated site, incorporating the already significant Power House and former Ultimo Tramshed buildings, the Ultimo Post Office Building and the newer western addition and public forecourt areas. We expect that this can be completed within a few weeks, however, the present uncertainties surrounding the impacts of the Covid-19 virus may interfere with our intentions in this regard. We sincerely hope that this nomination and the Harwood Building nomination can be dealt with as a matter of great urgency.

The National Trust, as always, is keen to work collaboratively and co-operatively with Heritage NSW. Your advice would be appreciated on whether the Trust may have misinterpreted the course of events on the progress of this nomination. We would be pleased to meet with you and other representatives of Heritage NSW at any convenient time to determine an appropriate way forward. Please do not hesitate to contact us for this purpose, or if we can assist in any way.

Yours sincerely,

Graham Quint  
Director, Conservation

Cc     The Chair, NSW Heritage Council  
        The President, Australia ICOMOS  
        Museums and Galleries Association of Australia  
        Engineering Heritage Australia  
        President Royal Australian Institute of Architects

Addendum:

**The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance, 2013.**

*Article 5.1 Conservation of a place should identify and take into consideration all aspects of cultural and natural significance without unwarranted emphasis on any one value at the expense of others.*

*Article 15.4: The contributions of all aspects of cultural significance of a place should be respected. If a place includes fabric, uses, associations or meanings of different periods, or different aspects of cultural significance, emphasising or interpreting one period or aspect at the expense of another can only be justified when what is left out, removed or diminished is of slight cultural significance and that which is emphasised or interpreted is of much greater cultural significance.*